

# What My Struggling Students Wanted Me to Understand

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"What do you really, really wish your professors understood?"

I've been posing that question to students in my remedial-writing courses over the past few semesters. At two-year colleges, we've collected plenty of statistics on the challenges facing underprepared students. But we haven't spent much time seeking their perspectives on teaching and learning. When given license to "talk back" — in any terms they wished — what did my developmental-writing students want to say to those of us at the front of the classroom?

Their responses were thoughtful, insightful, and, to my mind, laser-focused on exactly the needs that make teaching those students such a distinctive, textured, and, in the end, rewarding experience.

Show some emotion. My students wanted us to understand that most of them had entered the developmental classroom disappointed, if not outright depressed. They told poignant stories of realizing — as high school ended and classmates went off to fancy colleges — what "not being good at school" meant for their immediate futures.

As a huge booster for my own community college and for the two-year sector in general, I love the idea that we are a first chance for some students, a last chance for others, and increasingly, a prudent and vibrant option for those in between.

But that's not how my students saw it: Most of them confessed that they were envious of academically successful classmates and would rather be somewhere other than here. Equally poignant were their tales of placement-exam woes — the dread they felt about taking them and the blow it was to be told that they weren't good enough for "regular" coursework.

First and foremost, my students suggested, developmental instructors need to make room for students' feelings, and recognize that their feelings (as messy and intimate and seemingly extra-academic as they are) will always influence classroom performance. As one student put it, "If we don't seem motivated, it might be because you don't seem to care how we actually feel." Note that the emphasis there is on whether the professor listens — and responds — to students' feelings, and not on the emotional persona projected by the faculty member.

But on that front, my students were clear as well: The most meaningful faculty persona is positive, but not falsely so. Developmental students seem particularly attuned to false promises and sensitive to disappointment, so empty cheerleading won't be much appreciated. What they want instead is something more practical and realistic — a pathway, a plan, a step-by-step route to college-level work. "Show us the way out of the mess we're in," as one student put it. Well-defined action plans and clear benchmarks are highly appreciated by students who don't always intuit unspoken rules but have often been burned by them.

Don't take our failures personally. I was surprised to hear that remark — or perhaps to hear it put so bluntly — but the student who said it nearly got a standing ovation from classmates.

My students readily admitted that they often screwed up or failed to meet expectations. They turned work in late, unfinished, or not at all. They racked up too many absences. They lost focus and sometimes took the easy way out. When that happened, they wanted their professors to maintain equanimity and balance — and not read those errors as defections, treason, or revenge.

It is bad enough, they suggested, to fail. But to be hated for failing (and some did use the word "hate") was a burden they felt they could not bear. More than one student reported slinking away from a course after some relatively innocuous flaw, out of fear of facing a professor's outraged disappointment. Instead they suggested that we begin a corrective statement — either actually or at least mentally — with something like, "I'm not mad at you, but ... [you missed the deadline]."

It might also help, my students said, if we tried to understand how overwhelmed they often are, not just by their classes but also by work and

life. "I have four different bosses besides my actual boss," one student keenly declared. "Hopefully, when this is all over, I will never have this many bosses again!"

They recognized — but also somewhat resented — that we tend to hold a deep love for our subject and unconsciously affirm it above all other demands. But students have fragmented, split lives, with many competing priorities, including finding transportation, maintaining housing, and putting food on the table.

"Sometimes, something's got to give," my students agreed. And from time to time, that thing might be our assignments. But teachers should never assume that students aren't trying, or even that they don't appreciate professorial passion. The best developmental instructors simply recognize that academic consistency is, in part, a gift of privilege, and not purely a matter of personal effort or will.

Give us multiple, and varied, chances to succeed. Never is teaching less "one-size-fits-all" than in the land of developmental coursework. And my students agreed. Many suggestions came down to the idea that instruction, so much as possible, ought to be individualized. "Don't only lecture" was a common refrain, as was the notion that whole-class activities need not necessarily be the default.

Many developmental students identify as learning disabled or special needs, and some have had years of diagnostics that have helped them discover how they, personally, learn best. For that population, it is disappointing to have all that self-knowledge ("I'm a visual and kinaesthetic learner, and will do better if given a chance to physically and graphically organize my note-taking") thrown out the window by a professor who insists on completely standardized assignments.

Traditional forms of testing were also almost universally despised, as many of these students were, in fact, placed into developmental coursework because they do poorly on high-stakes tests. In general, my students asked — begged — for both formative and summative assessments of their learning, and for the chance to not only concentrate on weaknesses but also to support and celebrate strengths.

Finally, my students wanted us to consider giving them multiple chances to succeed, even if that meant (yes) accepting late work for reduced credit

(which all of my students agreed was fair), allowing for retests and revisions, providing extra or optional assignments that might allow a struggling student to earn more points, or moving closer to a standards-based, contract-grading model, in which, again, the requirements for passing were unambiguous but accommodating to multiple routes. "If I don't succeed at first," one student asked, "why can't I try again, without having to start over with a whole new class?" Students envisioned, instead, a sort of "completion camp" model — a space and a place where, if they were only a few standards shy, they could concentrate on the skills they'd missed rather than fail the entire class and have to start from the beginning again.

At the end of a semester, we routinely hand out course-evaluation forms that basically ask students, "How did I do?" It's a question likely to inspire shallow answers (sometimes polite, sometimes not). I would encourage more faculty members — and developmental educators in particular — to instead ask students, "What do you really wish that I knew or understood?" The question, posed that way, leaves a lot more to be said, and it offers a greater chance of bridging the gap between teacher and learner.

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